

Presentation by Sara T. Allen, Bradenton, Florida: HB 5785, 7-20-06
Prometheus Radio Project

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. Thank you to the Committee, the Committee Chair, and to all of you for asking me here today.

My name is Sara T. Allen, President of Ciara Enterprises, Inc. and Chief Consultant for KTAO-FM in Taos, NM. KTAO recently celebrated 14 years of transmitter operations using ONLY Solar Power!

I am also a member of the Federal Communications Commission's Media Security and Reliability Council 2, Toolkit Workgroup Committee, which was tasked with developing Disaster Recovery Planning Tools for all forms of Mass Media in the U.S.

Today I am here to represent The Prometheus Radio Project, an advocacy group for the low power FM radio (LP-FM) movement, and to present testimony that shows how important the expansion and protection of low power FM radio is to the emergency service and communications needs of this country.

Low Power FM radio is an extremely popular and extremely important tool that allows churches, schools and community organizations to operate very small, locally operated non-commercial radio stations. In 1999, the FCC created a new class of LPFM stations, leading to hundreds of new stations across the country.

Unfortunately, Congress passed legislation blocking the FCC from modernizing their interference protection rules pending further technical study on the impact of placing these tiny stations between existing full-power stations. Because of this legislation, hundreds of potential community stations have been blocked from the airwaves. The FCC commissioned a \$2.2 million study from the Mitre Corporation, and submitted their findings to Congress three years ago. The Senate Commerce Committee has twice voted in support of legislation that would allow the FCC to grant new LPFM licenses in urban markets. We ask that the House of Representatives also consider this legislation.

While these Low Power FM stations serve a critical ongoing role in the communities they serve, I'm here to speak about specifically about the important role that local community radio, low power FM in particular, plays in an emergency and in the recovery of neighborhoods and towns after a

disaster. I hope you'll agree that we must protect these stations and expand possibilities for communities to build them.

Low Power Radio plays a unique role in the FM band. While full power stations are designed to serve entire metropolitan areas, LPFM stations are, by definition, focused on very specific geographic targets.

The first story I want to tell is the story of the attempt to provide Low Power FM radio services to the displaced citizens, victims of Hurricane Katrina, who were living in the Houston Astrodome. People need information. Several Houston community members developed a plan to build and operate a community radio station located inside the Astrodome. The proposed station "Evacuation Radio Services," would broadcast essential information.

The Prometheus Radio Project was contacted for assistance and recommended that the Houston group contact the FCC to request an STA. In very short order the FCC granted authorization. Despite the quick action from the FCC, the Houston community group ran into bureaucratic resistance from the local officials at the Astrodome. Even with the support from the Senate Office of Kay Bailey Hutchinson, City Council members and the Mayor of Houston, Harris County officials refused to grant permission to allow the radio station to proceed.

Eventually, a licensed radio station was set up outside the Astrodome and did provide essential information to the displaced residents. FEMA notices, health notices, and vital travel information were shared with the residents, and the residents were able to tell their own stories and connect with families and friends after the disaster.

The bureaucratic delays prevented the timely broadcast of important information to the residents. The Houston Astrodome officials' reliance on their "loudspeaker" public address system led to the confusion and frustration of the residents.

Ladies and Gentlemen, anyone who has ever tried to understand what is being said over a stadium loudspeaker will agree that it is a very poor choice for communications of essential and detailed information. If Congress had already acted to expand low power FM radio to Houston, there would have been more potential choices for the residents at the Astrodome and displaced families across the Gulf to respond quickly and appropriately to their local needs.

The next story is a success story. It's the story of how Federal, State, and County Government, private industry and volunteers combined to create a radio station capable of covering a county wide area.

WQRZ-LP is located in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi and is the effort of Brice Phillips, a disabled amateur radio operator who foresaw disaster and several years ago made the effort to obtain authorization. His motive is to insure that the citizens of Hancock County have a reliable and continuous Emergency Alert System.

After Katrina made landfall, I offered my help by sending offers of assistance to every Gulf Coast Broadcaster Association, as well as the Society of Broadcast Engineers.

On Tuesday, Sept. 6th I received a call from John Poray, National Director of the SBE requesting assistance for WQRZ-LP. I coordinated an effort to request an emergency authorization from the FCC which was granted. I also arranged for the necessary equipment to be ordered and shipped into Hancock County. Working closely with Harris Corp. the necessary equipment was on its way by Friday evening and began arriving on site Saturday morning.

On Sunday morning, Sept. 11th, Broadcast Engineer Gary Sessums and I departed from the Hillsborough County EOC in Tampa, bound for Bay St. Louis and the Hancock County EOC. We arrived that evening and joined Gary Minker, also a Floridian, and planned our work for the following day.

On Monday morning the three of us joined Brice and we began the reconstruction of WQRZ-LP at Brice's surviving 120 foot tower. Brice's home was destroyed by the storm surge. His transmitter shack, which had been totally submerged in salt water, and his tower, survived Katrina. Brice had taken one of the antenna bays, his transmitter and some essential studio equipment to the Hancock County EOC where he continued to broadcast before, during and immediately after Katrina. He also provided health and welfare radio traffic using his amateur radio and was the only means of communication in and out of the Hancock County EOC immediately after Katrina.

Brice climbed the tower several times during the next few days and by Thursday evening WQRZ-LP went on the air, the signal strong enough to cover Hancock County and the most affected areas, Pearlington, Bay St. Louis, Waveland, Diamondhead, Pass Christian and Kiln, Mississippi.

We switched programming from Brice's low power operation at the old EOC to the studio we had set up at the new Hancock County EOC located near the Stennis International Airport.

I was making plans to return to Tampa. Tools were put away and the studio was organized and ready for use. I overheard someone in the Public Information Office mention a press release requesting assistance to operate WQRZ-LP.

I volunteered. So it began.

"You're listening to WQRZ-LP 103.5 FM - The Voice of Bay St. Louis, Waveland, Diamondhead and the Kiln – Broadcasting live from the Hancock County Emergency Operations Center – Your Source for Information"

I reported for duty Friday morning and went about developing a program strategy with the Public Information Office. The first day was a bit loose. I played music and broadcast news and information updates as frequently as the PIO made them available.

I overheard talk that the Secretary of Homeland Security, Michael Chertoff, would be visiting the EOC and as I was passing by the FEMA office I noticed that he was there and he offered me his hand which I shook, and then the broadcaster in me took over, I didn't let go of his hand and followed it back to him and said "Sir, I would like to put you on the radio station to address the people of Hancock County."

He agreed and became the first of many VIP guests on WQRZ-LP. I hadn't realized at the time that I was bucking protocol and I was informed later that day that I was lucky that I hadn't been "secured" by the Secret Service. I did, however, gain the notoriety and respect of the EOC leadership which led to ongoing access to VIP interviews which included a Congressional Delegation, Vice Admiral Thad Allen, Undersecretary Thomas Dorr, and many other locals and volunteers who shared their stories with the WQRZ-LP listeners.

By the end of the first week I had developed programming with regularly scheduled in-depth updates at 8, noon and 5. The PIO developed a daily newsletter which I read in its entirety. Whenever information was updated I was able to immediately go on the air with the new, accurate information.

Hurricane Rita arrived. There was a new round of flooding in Hancock County and the EOC was alerting people to move to higher ground.

Hurricane Rita affected us in many ways. It put a strain on already compromised systems and the EOC lost grid power. A damaged air handler motor caused a fire alarm in the building just as a Tornado Warning was being broadcast by the EAS. Brice was on the air and not about to be evacuated by fire safety personnel while he was broadcasting the warning which included the EOC in the tornados' path. That was an exciting moment.

WQRZ-LP was off the air. Flood waters had prevented easy access to the transmitter site and logistics was unable to refuel the generator. Brice decided to take matters into his own hands and floated 10 gallons of diesel fuel wading several hundred yards through the flood waters to make sure the citizens of Hancock County had access to important EOC and EAS information. Thanks to his efforts WQRZ-LP was back on the air, but as a consequence, Brice came down with bronchitis and pneumonia and I stayed at the radio station for another week while he recuperated. I insisted that he take the time to recover so that he wouldn't relapse and I could return home. Brice took my advice and rested until he had recovered and he was able to once again take over the controls at WQRZ-LP. Brice continues to bring the residents of Hancock County essential news and information directly from the EOC and will continue to do so as long as necessary. As you will read about in the packet of information I've brought, WQRZ-LP served and continues to serve as a lifeline for the residents of Bay St. Louis and Hancock County, Mississippi. With a new amendment to expand low power FM on H. R. 5785, this committee can bring stations like WQRZ-LP to hundreds, if not thousands, of communities that need them.

I lived and worked at the Hancock County EOC for 28 days. Bay St. Louis, Waveland, Diamondhead and the Kill will no longer be just a place on the map, but for me, a place that I called home.

LP-FM radio stations have proven to be a valuable resource before, during and after disaster. To continue this service and improve upon it, organizers from the Low Power FM community make the following recommendations to Congress:

To ensure that the greatest numbers of LP-FM stations are available and able to provide service and information in times of emergency and disaster, this Committee can amend the language of Senate Bill 312, sponsored by Senators John McCain, Maria Cantwell, and Patrick Leahy, onto House Bill 5785. This same language was recently amended to

Senator Stevens' telecommunications bill, SB 2686, with a vote of 14 for, and 7 against. Senate Bill 312 would expand low power FM radio to frequencies that were restricted for five years, while the FCC studied whether or not there would be interference to existing stations from new LPFM stations. Now that the Commission has proven with a 2.2 million dollar study that there is room for these essential stations on the dial, we hope you will move quickly to amend this bill to expand low power FM radio.

Furthermore, this Committee can move to protect those low power FM stations on the air. As you can read in Congresswoman Slaughter's recent bill, HB 3731, many current LP-FM stations are under threat of being knocked off the air by full power broadcasters, leaving hundreds of communities without the local service they need in safety or in disaster.

Full power stations should not be allowed to encroach upon LP-FM stations. This will ensure that LP-FM stations will be able to broadcast accurate local emergency and disaster information without interference and that the communities don't lose this trusted source of information when they need it most.

There are many other stories of success and support from low power and community radio stations, licensed to churches, schools, municipalities, and community groups, included in the packet I've brought. To reiterate, it is community radio which is so vitally placed to provide information, relief and communications before, during and after an emergency. Thousands of volunteers and potential community broadcasters stand by ready to help.

Finally, as an experienced engineer and someone who has worked with stations who use the Emergency Alert System (EAS), I see a great opportunity with HB 5785 to diversify and specify the alerts broadcast to new communities and for new situations. With EAS, a radio station has the option of selecting which alerts it uses, for example -- nuclear attack, weather, child abduction, etcetera. Some alerts are mandatory for the station to broadcast, but others may be selected by the broadcaster when the alert system is first set up.

Low power FM stations broadcast in particular communities may broadcast in many languages, from Hmong to Spanish to Zapotec. It would be ironic and tragic if some listeners could not understand an emergency alert with life saving alert because their English was not yet strong enough to comprehend detailed emergency instructions. It would greatly enhance the efficacy of EAS if it had multiple language capabilities. As I see it this would

not require hardware changes or new equipment, just an update of software that seems well worth it, in the service of our communities.

Thank you to the Committee for giving community radio this opportunity to speak.